

Mishawaka company assists large retailers

By **GENE STOWE**
Tribune Correspondent

Large retailers are handing off inventory management responsibilities to vendors more and more, and advances in communications technology have enabled vendors to handle the job in detail — often with help from Decision Support Services of Mishawaka.

“We provide information services to consumer products companies, mostly in regards to inventory and retail sales data,” says Kevin Geary, a partner in the company that started about 11 years ago. “We help them manage their business at large retailers.

“It’s more having to do with forecasting, promotion, identifying problems — out of stock, understocked.”

Sales data comes from the retailer.

“The retailers make it accessible to their vendors,” Geary says. “They’re trying to push some of the costs off on the vendors to analyze and manage their business. They’re slowly having the vendors manage their own inventory. They rely on the vendor to identify problems.

“We help the vendor prepare for buyer meetings, react to a buyer’s decision. We help them to evaluate ‘Is that a good decision?’ The vendor with the information can do a more exact analysis than the retailer really has time to do. The retailer has to do more broad-based analyses and groupings. We help the vendor drill down to the store-item.

“In addition to supporting the retail sales team, we have information has been useful for promotion planners, product planning, forecasters, store coverage teams, executives and throughout the vendor organization.”

In the early years, an important service was analyzing how much was selling so that the vendor would not be misled by the buyer’s purchasing pattern. Overstock could mean an unexpected halt in orders, so it’s important for the vendor to know that the product is actually selling.

At first, Decision Support Services provided a check at the top level — the retailer in general rather than the individual stores — once a month or every other week. Now vendors can get data every week at store level.

“The next step is to update it daily. That’s very close,” says Geary, adding that slower-moving high-priced products don’t need such frequent checks. “If you’re selling ketchup or toilet paper or perishables like mushrooms, that



Decision Support Services of Mishawaka representatives from left are Mike Douthitt, Jason Vickers, and Kevin Geary. The trio are shown in their offices on West Edison Road.

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BARBARA ALLISON

really matters. You can’t have a week’s supply.

“We can go to a much more detailed level now. What days are better? What days should you run a promo?”

Outsourcing the task makes sense for both large and small vendors because of the special focus of the information technology and analysis.

Small vendors would have to deal with information technology issues as well as analysis issues if they did not outsource the work, and Decision Support Services is more flexible than the internal information technology departments of large companies.

“We can help them with higher level tools and experienced analysts for a low monthly fee,” Geary says. “We’re more specific to the retail analysis, supply chain, sales and promotion.

“The data goes to the consumer products company from the re-

tailer. We help them manage the data. We used to print the data and send it. Then we started e-mailing it. Now we have Web portal for the information sharing.”

Decision Support Services has a staff of 10, including its Mishawaka headquarters and offices in Bentonville, Ark., the home of Wal-Mart, and Mooresville, N.C., the home of Lowe’s, where vendors have satellite offices to transact business with the retailers.

Decision Support is also finding applications for its services beyond the retail field.

“We’ve tried to stay as cutting-edge as possible in the business intelligence arena, and our retail clients have benefited,” says partner Mike Coffey. “Now we’ve set a goal for ourselves to move outside retail and pursue similar success in other business groupings, such as banking and hotel management.

“The things we’ve learned bringing solutions to our retail clients are applicable in other areas, and by leveraging that knowledge, we believe the sky’s

the limit.”

For more information on Decision Support Services see the company’s Web site at www.dss-retail.com.

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